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Southwest Florida wants to keep its influence growing and its water flowing

Water projects, arts funding and road infrastructure among region's needs.

By Jacob Ogles | January 13, 2020

There's no cities boasting more than a quarter million people in Southwest Florida. No major league sporting teams call the region home. But the environment, education and cultural significance of the area qualify it to routinely claim the title of paradise.

Sarasota's art community delivers one of the highest economic impacts per capita outside Manhattan. Cape Coral's been repeatedly listed as the nation's top boomtown. And it remains home to Big Cypress National Preserve, a national park roughly the size of Rhode Island.

The region happens to be home to some of the area's most powerful state lawmakers, from Senate President Bill Galvano to Republican Party of Florida Chair Joe Gruters to Senate Republican Leader Kathleen Passidomo and House Republican Leader Dane Eagle.

So what's the region need this Legislative Session? As much as it can get.

"In appropriations, we need to come together and bring back as much as we can," said Gruters, also a Sarasota state Senator.

Water Water Everywhere

Gruters knows representing a community next door to Galvano's Bradenton home had made it easier to secure funding this year, but sees a future soon where that influence wanes a little bit.

In the meantime, he's pushing for what he can with road improvements to Interstate-75, environmental spending and economic attention.

Indeed, Galvano himself said regional representation has always been his top priority as a lawmaker, even as he's moved into leadership. But even after securing plans for a major toll running down the spine of Southwest Florida, he knows there's more work to do.

"There are issues that we have been working on for years, that will continue to be worked on," he said.

He's particularly concerned about restoration of sea life in the Gulf of Mexico. The region in 2019 was spared a year of toxic blooms like those experienced the prior year's red tide assault. But ecosystems are still recovering from the 2018 event. Southwest Florida last Legislative Session secured recurring funding for an institute studying red tide basing work at Mote Marine Laboratory.

Galvano predicts the environment will still do well in the budget this session, and that's good for Southwest Florida.

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Further south, state Rep. Spencer Roach, Lee County Legislative Delegation chair, has an eye on the Everglades. The state last year put a priority of speeding funding for the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir, which in turn won the support of the federal government. But Everglades restoration will require more than that one structure.

“We cannot take the eye off the ball,” Roach said. “We need to continue advocating for funding for research, for reservoirs. And we need to make sure that our colleagues that are not as impacted by water quality issues, we need to continue to educate them on how important this is to use. We need to educate the public that everything is not just fixed up and that we are not out of the woods yet.”

The good news is with Gov. Ron DeSantis focusing much of his political energy on water issues, lawmakers are following that lead.

“Many of the needs of Southwest Florida match Florida’s needs,” said state Rep. Tommy Gregory. The Lakewood Ranch Republican said the issues his constituents care most about line up well with overall tone of session. Researching ways to preserve the environment. Preparing roads for future growth patterns. All of it connects to DeSantis’ agenda and that of leadership in both chambers. It’s just making sure Southwest Florida gets a good share of the resources and attention associated with those goals

Paving The Future

Gregory has been paying close to the M-CORES process, the one that will determine the final course of the Heartland Parkway, and he wants to make sure his district, which butts up just west of where that road will go, has the right level of road capacity to connect.

Other important projects for the area? State Rep. Will Robinson, chairman of the Manatee County Legislative Delegation, notes there’s a number of bridges connecting keys in Southwest Florida to the mainland that are in desperate need of replacement. Some of that will take time. He mentions the DeSoto connecting downtown Bradenton and Palmetto. That could take years of community input. But he wants to make sure state transportation officials follow through and get the project on schedule.

Gruters notes a number of intersections on Interstate-75 in Sarasota County are scheduled down the road to be converted to diverging diamonds; the nation’s first such intersection opened in Sarasota at University Parkway in 2017.

“Given the amount of time to permit the Fort Hamer bridge, I have concerns whether my-soon-to-be grandchildren will ever see that bridge,” he said.

The environmental conditions in Southwest Florida tie together with infrastructural needs. Many of Robinson’s personal priorities include funding to tackle flood prevention in beachfront communities like Holmes Beach. Even projects like repopulating oyster populations in the Manatee River have economic and ecological benefits attached that reach far beyond breeding bivalves.

Of course, every member has their own individual projects their districts need. Roach wants funding for a fire station in Lehigh Acres. State Rep. Heather Fitzhagen wants money to fight human trafficking in South Florida. State Rep. Margaret Good has requests in to fund drug rehab and early intervention in Sarasota.

Gruters said he will work to make sure Florida gets solid funding for arts grants. Last year \$19 million out of \$21 million requested made it into the final budget, and he wants full funding this year. And while he considers it unlikely the Sadowski Trust will go unraided in 2020, he noted Southwest Florida suffers particular problems with affordable and workforce housing, so it’s in the best interest for lawmakers to defend that revenue.

Sticking Together

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Lawmakers throughout the region recognize the need to work together across party lines (though Good is the only Democratic lawmaker living between Naples and Bradenton this side of Lake Okeechobee).

Of course, outside political concerns also have some lawmakers nervous. An open Congressional race in Southwest Florida will pit three regional lawmakers — Eagle, Fitzenhagen and Byron Donalds — against one another in a Republican primary this year.

Fitzenhagen for her part doesn't think that will be a problem. "We all have the kind of personalities will continue to work together and will do the right thing," she said.

State Sen. Kathleen Passidomo feels confident everyone will see the benefit of doing good for the region. "I know everybody, at least the sitting legislators, who is running and they are all very good people," she said. "I'd be disappointed if there were a lot of backstabbing this year. I'm assuming it will be very cordial election— at least during Session."

But there's also questions about the region's influence in the immediate future.

Passidomo has set herself up as the like Senate President, but not until 2022. That will mark two times in five years when Southwest Florida has produced a Senate President, though in between there's going to be a bit of a vacuum in seniority.

With state Rep. Wengay Newton running for Pinellas County Commission, Donalds and Good running for Congress and a number of senior members facing term limits, Southwest Florida in 2021 will be short on House members with more than one term of experience. Assuming Bob Rommel gets elected to a third term in his (very safe) district, he'll be the only House member with any seniority. The region will also have nearly half its Senate seats filled by freshman.

Roach, who right now faces no challenge to his own reelection, is looking at becoming the senior House member of the Lee County delegation next year. But he's optimistic about the future after that. That good thing about seeing so many Lee, Collier and Charlotte seats open up at the end of 2020 will be that a class of freshman will eventually have outsized influence in picking House leadership in years to come.

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